

Reporters and editors still often ask whether we should link from our story to this, that or some other thing.

The answer is simple: Yes. Yes. And yes.

We're generally good about linking to our own past coverage, which is important. We're pretty good — though inconsistent — about linking to original documents and other background material. But in too many cases, we are still not good about linking to other sites and news organizations that have published valuable work on the subject at hand.

A quarter-century or so into the age of the web, it's strange that we should need reminders about this. But in just the last couple of weeks I've been asked in at least three cases from different departments — always after the fact, unfortunately — whether we should have linked to or otherwise cited earlier coverage from another news site. My answer was the same as it is in 95 percent of such cases: Yes! Why wouldn't we?

Linking is the ultimate win-win-win situation. If a reader is interested in the topic of your story, it's just common sense that she would value a signpost to others' reporting on the same subject. (Don't worry about sending readers elsewhere; if we're consistently providing value, they'll come back.) Adding links can also give our stories a boost in search.

And finally, linking routinely to the work of others can erase the perception — often exaggerated but not altogether wrong — that The Times can be aloof, self-obsessed and ungenerous in acknowledging the work of others. That perception feeds on itself with each oversight or missed opportunity, and it can be damaging. Social media is full of complaints by fellow journalists who claim we refused to acknowledge their work, or worse yet, pilfered their idea.

Linking to other news organizations is not an admission that we got scooped. It doesn't suggest that the other site had everything we have, or that our story is just a rehash. And it absolutely doesn't suggest that we've appropriated someone else's work. Far from it. Failing to link might suggest, to some suspicious minds, that we are concealing our reliance on others. Linking (or, when appropriate, crediting or citing others by name) is the best way to guard against any such implication.

In some cases, to be sure, we have a clear journalistic obligation to credit another news organization: when we are relying on reporting by others that we haven't been able to match; when we would not have known about a story at all if another outlet hadn't brought it to light; or when a major exclusive by another outlet has set the agenda for a story. In cases like that, we absolutely should acknowledge other outlets by name, as well as linking.

In most cases, though, it's not a question of ethics or obligation — it's just good journalism to link. If you're asking whether we're obligated to provide a link or other reference in a given story, you're probably asking the wrong question. Linking should be the default.

Of course, we have to make reasonable judgments. If a dozen different outlets have weighed in on a topic, we're not going to link to them all — and it might not make sense to link to one and not the others (just be sure not to give the impression that we're the only ones to address the topic). But if, in doing your reporting or editing, you see that one or a handful of other places have done significant pieces on the same topic we're covering, our routine approach should be: Yes, let's link.

It's free and easy. Readers like it. It deepens our journalism and may increase our audience. Our journalistic colleagues appreciate it.

Why wouldn't we do it?

— Phil Corbett